Internet Safety for Children

There are some people who use the Internet as a means to sexually exploit children. Some of these individuals are gradually able to seduce their targets through the use of attention, affection, kindness and even gifts. These individuals are often willing to devote considerable amounts of time, money and energy in the process. They listen to and emphasize with the problems of children. They will be aware of the latest music, hobbies, and interests of children. They attempt to gradually lower children's inhibitions by slowly introducing sexual context and content into their conversations.

Adolescents and teenagers are particularly at risk at being the victims of sexual predators on Internet because they often use the computer unsupervised and are more likely than younger children to participate in online discussions regarding companionship, relationships, or sexual activity.

What Are the Risks?

- **Exposure to Inappropriate Material**
  A child may be exposed to inappropriate material that is sexual, hateful, or violent in nature, or encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal.
- **Physical Molestation**
  Another risk is that, while online, a child might provide information or arrange an encounter that could risk his or her safety. In some cases, pedophiles have used email, bulletin boards, and chat areas to gain a child's confidence and then arrange a face-to-face meeting.
- **Harassment**
  A child might encounter email or chat/bulletin board messages that are harassing, demeaning or belligerent.
- **Financial Risk**
  A child might do something that has negative financial consequences such as giving out a parent's credit card number.

Signs That a Child Might be at Risk Online

- **The child spends large amounts of time online, especially at night**
  Many children who fall victim to computer sex-offenders spend large amounts of time online, particularly in chat rooms. Children online are at the greatest risk during the evening hours. Most offenders spend their evenings online trying to locate and lure children or seeking pornography.
- **The child's computer has pornography on it**
  Pornography is often used in the sexual victimization of children. Child pornography may be used to show the child victim that sex between children and adults is "normal."
- **The child receives telephone calls from unknown men or makes telephone calls, sometimes long distance, to numbers not recognized by the parent**
  Most computer sex-offenders want to talk to their child victims on the telephone. They often engage in "phone sex" with the children and often seek to set up an actual meeting for real sex.
  While a child may be hesitant to give out his/her home telephone number, the

offenders may give out theirs. With Caller ID, they can readily find out the child's phone number.

- **The child receives mail, gifts, or packages from someone the parent doesn't know**
As part of the seduction process, it is common for offenders to send letters, photographs, and all manners of gifts to their potential victims.
- **The child turns the computer monitor off or quickly changes the screen on the monitor when a parent enters the room**
A child looking at pornographic images of having sexually explicit conversations does not want the parent to see it on the screen.

Some children have developed an acronym language intended to trick parents. These acronyms include the following:

POS	-	Parents over shoulder
TOS	-	Teacher over shoulder
PAW	-	Parents are watching
TAW	-	Teacher is watching
SAW	-	Siblings are watching
CTN	-	Can't talk now
NP	-	Nosy parents
P911	-	My parents are coming!
PA	-	Parent alert
PAL	-	Parents are listening
PAN	-	Parents are nearby

- **The child becomes withdrawn from the family**
Computer sex-offenders will work very hard at driving a wedge between a child and their family or at exploiting their relationships. They will accentuate any minor problems at home the child might have. Children may also become withdrawn after sexual victimization.

Guidelines for Parents

By taking responsibility for your children's online computer use, parents can greatly minimize any potential risks of being online. Make it a family rule to:

- Never give out identifying information - home address, school name, or telephone number - in a public message such as chat or bulletin boards, and be sure you're dealing with someone that both you and your children know and trust before giving out this information via email.
- Get to know the services your child uses. If you don't know how to log on, get your child to show you. Find out what types of information it offers and whether there are ways for parents to block out objectionable material.
- Never allow a child to arrange a face-to-face meeting with another computer user without parental permission. If a meeting is arranged, make the first one in a public spot, and be sure to accompany your child.
- Never respond to messages or bulletin board items that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, threatening, or make you feel uncomfortable. Encourage your children to tell you if they encounter such messages. If you or your child receives a message that is harassing, of a sexual nature, or threatening, forward a copy of the message to your service provider and ask for their assistance.

- Remember that people online may not be who they seem. Because you can't see or even hear the person it would be easy for someone to misrepresent him-or herself. Thus, someone indicating that "she" is a "12-year-old girl" could in reality be a 40-yea r-old man.
- Remember that everything you read online may not be true. Any offer that's "too good to be true" probably is. Be very careful about any offers that involve you're coming to a meeting or having someone visit your house.
- Set reasonable rules and guidelines for computer use by your children. Discuss these rules and post them near the computer as a reminder. Remember to monitor their compliance with these rules, especially when it comes to the amount of time your children spend on the computer. A child or teenager's excessive use of online services or bulletin boards, especially late at night, may be a clue that there is a potential problem. Remember that personal computers and online services should not be used as electronic babysitters.

"My Rules for Online Safety"
(computer use rules for children)

- I will not give out personal information such as my address, telephone number, parent's work address/telephone number, or the name and location of my school without my parent's permission.
- I will tell my parents right away if I come across any information that makes me feel uncomfortable.
- I will never agree to get together with someone I "meet" online without first checking with my parents. If my parents agree to the meeting, I will be sure that it is in a public place and bring my mother or father along.
- I will never send a person my picture or anything else without first checking with my parents.
- I will not respond to any messages that are mean or in any way make me feel uncomfortable. It is not my fault if I get a message like that. If I do I will tell my parents right away so that they can contact the online service.
- I will talk with my parents so that we can set up rules for going online. We will decide upon the time of day that I can be online, the length of time I can be online and appropriate areas for me to visit. I will not access other areas or break these rules without their permission.